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Fire Sprinklers Proposed for New Houses in Montgomery

By Fredrick Kunkle and Michael H. Cottman

A Montgomery County Council member will introduce legislation today to require built-in fire sprinkler systems in all new residential construction, including single-family homes.

If the county adopts the measure drafted by Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg), Montgomery would become the largest locality with such a requirement, according to U.S. Fire Administration and industry officials.

"Sprinkler systems can be the difference between life and death for county residents," Andrews said at a news conference yesterday.

County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) also voiced his support. "This small device, with a small price tag -- when apportioned over the life of a mortgage -- can have a huge impact on the safety of one's family, especially considering that the most vulnerable residents in a fire are children under the age of 5, adults 65 and older and pets," he said.

The legislation could meet some resistance from home builders, who say the systems add costs without necessarily improving safety.

"Sprinklers do not save lives; they save property," said Raquel Montenegro, associate director of legislative affairs for the Maryland National Capital Building Industry Association. "Sprinklers are not the most effective way to save lives."

Montenegro said that most residential fire-related deaths occur as a result of smoke inhalation and that victims often die from breathing toxic fumes before sprinklers are activated.

Because the cost of sprinklers would vary from home to home, Montenegro said, the decision to install them should be left to consumers, not mandated by the county. "The problem is there are no fixed costs," she said.

John A. Viniello, president of the National Fire Sprinkler Association, said the cost of installing sprinklers is about \$1.50 per square foot, and they can be hooked up to the house's regular plumbing. Sprinklers also can lead to discounts of 10 percent to 15 percent on homeowners' insurance premiums, Viniello said.

For years, sprinklers have been widely used in apartment buildings, commercial buildings and other multi-family homes, but they are still relatively rare in single-family homes.

The Fire Administration says more than 400 communities -- including Prince George's County -- require sprinklers in new single-family homes. Most laws typically do not require existing homes to be retrofitted.

"We would love to be able to require sprinklers in a residential environment," Arlington County Fire Chief Edward P. Plaughter said. But under Virginia's form of government, localities cannot enact stricter fire codes than the state's, he said.

Fires kill more people than all other natural disasters, such as floods, hurricanes, tornadoes and earthquakes combined, and U.S. Fire Administrator R. David Paulison said Friday that he plans to push for broader application of residential sprinklers throughout the nation.

Andrews said his bill will also encourage retrofitting existing dwellings with a rarely used county property tax credit that can pay up to the full cost. The idea drew his attention after Rockville and Gaithersburg enacted such laws and because of the string of arsons in the District, Prince George's and Montgomery counties, he said. The County Council will hold a hearing on the legislation this afternoon.

Fire sprinklers have been in use in the United States since the 1800s, appearing first in New England cotton mills, said Viniello, president of the sprinkler trade group.

In the late 1970s, San Clemente, Calif., became the first city to require sprinklers in single-family detached residences, Fire Administration officials said.

Scottsdale, a Phoenix suburb of about 203,000 residents, enacted a law, which took effect in 1986, requiring residential sprinklers, and officials there have documented a significant drop in loss of life and property since then. One study found that average property loss in homes with sprinklers was an estimated \$17,200. Without sprinklers, the loss was an estimated \$116,000.

Prince George's adopted its ordinance requiring sprinklers in all new homes in 1987, said Capt. Chauncey Bowers, a fire and emergency medical services spokesman.

The law, which took effect in 1992, is credited with saving 235 lives and more than \$22 million in property losses, he said.

Industry and public officials say residential sprinklers could replicate the success of smoke detectors, which were seldom heard of in the 1960s. By 1993, 92 percent of all U.S. homes had them, and they helped reduce fire-related deaths from 9,000 a year to about 3,500, Paulison said. Because 80 percent of all fire-related fatalities occur in the home, sprinklers could reduce the number.

"You can rebuild a home, but you can't replace lives," Paulison said.